

Information as Performance: Mobile Technology, City Streets and the Anti-Tourist

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Abstract

This paper looks at the extent to which information is performative, meaning that in addition to having a role in gathering, evaluating and/or circulating data, information is also deeply tied to identity work. Drawing on interviews with 26 participants, all of whom had moved to New York City in the last two years, I analyze references to using technology – specifically mobile technology – in order to avoid looking like a tourist. From an urban informatics perspective, this phenomenon provides a means of opening up discussion into the inter-relatedness of people, technology and urban space. From an HIB perspective, my discussion offers a means of addressing the performative nature of information, which is vital to understanding information in the context of everyday life.

Keywords: urban informatics, transnationalism, information practices

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1 Introduction

Part of the social turn within information science (IS) as a discipline has been to recognize that locating and evaluating information represents only one part of analyzing human information behavior (HIB); more broadly (and more complexly) HIB also comprises what people do with information in daily life (Budd & Anstaett, 2013; Case, 2012) and how it shapes their movements to and relationships in the world (Jaeger & Burnett, 2010). In her work on the information practices of women inmates in a high-security prison, Chatman (1999) argued that “information is really a *performance*. It carries with it a specific *narrative* that is easily adaptable to the expectations and needs of members of a small world” (p. 208). This sociological approach to understanding information as a performance provides a framework for analyzing how different socio-technical practices are read as normative versus non-normative based on highly localized social contexts, what Chatman would call small worlds. In this paper, I consider the performative nature of information by drawing on one facet of everyday life for transnational migrants to urban areas: the use of technology to avoid looking like a tourist. In this instance, information needs are intertwined with a desire to perform a particular kind of identity – in this case, to perform a sense of belonging in and familiarity with New York City.

After a brief introduction to HIB research on transnationalism, I outline the qualitative methods used to gather data for this investigation. I then present findings. Given the brevity of this note, my object is to use this specific set of practices as a way of articulating the performative function of information and point to implications for future work and HIB theory.

2 Context

As of 2008, more people worldwide were living in cities than not (United Nations, 2008). This process of urbanization has provoked both journalistic and academic inquiry, alternatively focused on the economic, environmental and socio-cultural implications of movements of people to cities. Within LIS, research specific

to urban environments is largely rooted in investigations of urban libraries¹, such as Agosto and Hughes-Hassel's (2005; 2006) work on everyday life information practices of urban teens, Fisher, Durrance and Bouch Hinton's (2004) research on immigrants' use of public libraries in Queens, New York and Fenster-Sparber's (2008) work on teen reading in a juvenile detention center in New York. More specifically relevant to my project, Agada's (1999) work on gatekeepers in inner-city Milwaukee proved influential in encouraging work on non-dominant groups, some of which has focused on city life (e.g. Caidi & Allard, 2005; Caidi, Allard & Quirke, 2010; Cheong, 2007; Fisher, Durrance & Bouch Hinton, 2004; Johnson, 2007; Savolainen, 2007; Spink & Cole, 2001). In contrast, I look at information practices embedded in everyday urban life among transnational newcomers. As newcomers to the city, transnational migrants are confronted with tasks of making sense of city space, part of which entails learning not just routes between locations but also how to act in city space. In this brief paper, I look specifically at this dilemma of performing familiarity with city space as a way of thinking about the social life of information.

3 Methodology

My analysis is taken from a larger investigation of information practices of transnational migrants in the New York City metropolitan area. Interviews were conducted between December of 2011 and September of 2012. Participants were recruited through two methods: 18 were recruited from English as a Second Language (ESL) programs in and around New York City. A second group of eight participants were located through word-of-mouth recruitment, and consisted of current or former graduate students from countries outside the United States. In both cases, participants were screened based on the length of time that they had lived in New York, limiting the interview pool to those who had arrived within the last two years. In total, the 26 participants hailed from 20 different countries and ranged in age from 22 to 60. For details on participants, see Table 1.

¹ For an activist rather than academic perspective, see Urban Librarians Unite, formed in 2010 (urbanlibrariansunite.org).

Participant Details				
Name	Age	Nationality	Residence in NYC	Profession
Alice	26	Australia	18 months	Barista
Amelie	27	France	2 weeks	Unemployed
Araceli	29	Mexico	7 months	Hostess
Cecille	33	Cameroon	2 years	Teacher
Ishmael	42	Togo	6 months	Unemployed
Julio	60	Dominican Republic	9 months	Unemployed
Jorge	29	Spain	6 months	IT worker
Juan	37	Uruguay	3 months	Factory worker
Kiki	32	Japan	1 year	Nanny
Lalo	35	Chile	4 months	Auto mechanic
Laura	34	Brazil	1 year	Unemployed
Luka	29	Georgia	2 years	NGO
Miao	36	China	1 month	Student
Midori	38	Japan	3 months	Research fellow
Nalan	32	Turkey	2 years	IT worker
Noely	32	Venezuela	1 year	PR person
Raul	22	Honduras	18 months	Student
Rob	28	Puerto Rico	1 year	Delivery person
Carla	26	Philippines	2 years	Student
Dinan	25	India	18 months	IT worker
Gia	32	Indonesia	2 years	Journalist
Jacinta	33	Mexico	2 years	NGO
Javier	26	Brazil	18 months	Student
Lu	28	Mexico	1 year	NGO
Sue	29	Korea	2 years	Student
Wen	26	China	1 year	Student

Table 1: Participant details include age at time of interview, country of origin and the length of time in New York. Julio declined to provide his age, but we estimate him to be about 60. As discussed in the methods section, participants were recruited

Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were audio recorded. Interview questions focused on resources for tasks like finding an apartment and locating ESL classes, as well as technologies for keeping in touch with people abroad and the role of SNSs in everyday urban life. Transcripts were coded using an emic/etic coding strategy (Miles & Huberman, 2009), which involves creating a series of high-level “etic” codes corresponding to themes identified prior to coding: urban space, changing relationships to space over time, personal networks and technological practices. “Emic” subcategories were then nested underneath, reflecting participants’ own terms and conceptualizations of those categories. A number of themes grew out of this process, including information practices used to become familiar with city space, relationships to the city in terms of navigational as well as ethnicity-based landmarks, and technology and identity work. In this paper, I present findings related to this third area, concentrating on the use of technology to mask participants’ status as newcomers.

4 Findings

Across interviews, the figure of the tourist drew remarkably similar associations,² including naivety, haplessness and ignorance. Interestingly, Cecille (33, Cameroon) explicitly linked taking pleasure in being in the city to being a tourist: “You have to be a visitor, a tourist to enjoy the city. If you live in the city, you can’t enjoy the city.” Julio (60, Dominican Republic) echoed these sentiments, commenting “I know the place [New York] as a tourist, but as a resident, it’s another status.” Julio went on to elaborate on the different experiences of New York as a visitor versus as a resident:

When you come here as a visitor, all the people are very friendly. But later, when you come here, to keep family here, it’s another story... Like visitors enjoy the day, maybe they stay here as a permanent resident, [but] it’s a lot of money, because no matter what New York is very expensive.

These accounts suggest a trajectory of identity that moves from tourist to resident and also from leisure to labor. They also point to an awareness of difference in privilege ascribed to the identity of natives versus newcomers. In the following sections, I describe the role of technology in terms of the desire to avoid looking like a tourist.

Participants overwhelmingly ascribed a kind of vulnerability and foolishness to tourist identity, and many described specific uses of technology to avoid the appearance of possessing those traits. For example, Amelie (27, France) made it a habit to consult online information about public transportation, specifically the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA), prior to leaving the house: “I go to the website of MTA to know how to have a card, because I don’t want [to look] like a tourist.” Until information about transit is sufficiently ingrained, technology becomes an important proxy for information that enables evasion of having to ask a stranger or look at a map while at a subway station. Amelie’s reluctance to display lacking knowledge was echoed by Sue (29, Korea), who noted that the privacy of mobile technology allows for the concealment of her newcomer status:

I don’t know if I’m comfortable with the paper map anymore, the big paper map, because that’s kind of a sign that I’m a tourist. So to hide that, I just use the mobile technology to pretend [to be] the native person in that area ... I don’t want to be seen as a tourist in any city, that’s why I just want to use [the map] privately, rely on the mobile technology. And avoiding asking some person, any person on the spot.

For Sue, mobile technology is not only useful for providing information about urban space, it furthermore provides privacy of information practices, without the vulnerable display of lacking information. In these accounts, outing oneself as a non-native is avoided by careful arrangements of technology³, as in Sue’s surreptitious referencing of mobile apps or Amelie’s pre-emptive consultation with the MTA website prior to leaving the house. These negotiations reflect how information behavior can be at once technological, performative and relational, as a deliberate attempt to distance oneself from appearing to be a tourist.

With extended experience in the city, participants frequently came to contrast current understanding of city life with those of tourists, a discursive maneuver that distances their present self (as acculturated to and knowledgeable about the city) from a touristy past. Yet, even as participants sought to distance themselves from tourists, for those who had visited New York prior to migrating, there was often a fondness in recounting initial, pre-migration trips to the city. For example, Giselle (30, Philippines) contrasted her initial visit to New York in terms of technology with her current practices:

² My favorite description of tourists came from Raul (22 Honduras), who characterized tourists in the following way: “they are wearing a backpack, sunglasses, and they have a lot of water.”

³ Given the increasing popularity among tourists of using PDAs such as ipads to navigate city space (See Tucker, 2013), it’s interesting to consider of how the figure of the tourist will continue to evolve in terms of technology (or the lack of technology) signaling either belonging or outsider-status.

[Using Google Maps is] useful, so you kind of just don't get lost, but sometimes I forget even to look around. When I was here actually two years ago, before having a smart phone and I was just a tourist, I literally walked from midtown all the way to the Met ... And I found my way around. Granted it took me like the whole day, but I was just like, "oh, wow," looking around. And that was great, also because I wasn't doing anything, I mean I was a tourist and I had all the time to walk and think and stop and go here and go there. Google maps helps if you just have to be there.

It's interesting that in her description of first visiting New York, Giselle couples "before having a smart phone" and being "just a tourist," collapsing the two conditions. This underscores Sue's argument that being without a smartphone leaves unappealing options of having to ask for help from strangers or carrying a paper map, beacons of newness in city space. Another way of reading Giselle's constructions of being a tourist versus being a resident is to suggest that for tourists, the use of technologies to maneuver through urban space is almost entirely informational, whereas for those attempting to distance themselves from the figure of the tourist, technology provides an additional, performative function of concealing newness.

As a final example of participants distancing themselves from tourists, Rob (28, Puerto Rico) described motivations for familiarizing himself with city life specifically in terms of being a non-tourist:

My first week, I didn't know what I was doing. I just let my body go and go with the flow, just intake people, like not look like a tourist ... Because I *know* I'm not going to be a tourist, this is going to be my home, I was going to stay here for a long time. Living in another place, it's such a drastic change, I wanted to make it part of me as quickly as possible.

For Rob, a crucial component of identity work included monitoring the behaviors of those whom he perceives to be Native New Yorkers. In asking for specifics about this monitoring, Rob explained, "So I started really being observant and watch how New York life is to get adaptive, and not be so lost. In order to avoid looking (or feeling) like a tourist, Rob canvassed the practices of those around him that he perceived to be city natives. Again, the figure of the tourist is important in giving transnational migrants a counter-narrative for identity work, a characterization to avoid as deliberately as possible.

5 Discussion

What drives participants' discomfort with tourist identity? The reluctance to admit a lack of information stems from the display of vulnerability or alterity (Chatman, 1999; Hamer, 2003; Hasler & Ruthven, 2011), but there are some additional complications in the accounts discussed here. Interestingly, the construction of tourists as not just socially but spatially naïve is echoed by Lefebvre (1967/2007), who wrote of

the archetypal touristic delusion of being a participant in [space], and of understanding it completely, even though the tourist merely passes through a country or countryside and absorbs its image in a quite passive way. The work in its concrete reality, its products, and the productive activity involved are all thus obscured and indeed consigned to oblivion. (p. 189)

Lefebvre's definition hinges on participation, where tourists are distinct from natives because of their passivity and lack of engagement with space. For Lefebvre, it is impossible for tourists to understand the inter-relationships between space and social practice.

Participants echoed many facets of Lefebvre's construction, in that they associated tourists with transitory visiting, with pleasure rather than work, with whirlwind, predictable breadth of "tourist traps" rather than a few "hidden gems" or self-made discoveries. I would argue that transnational migrants I interviewed were resistant to the "placelessness" associated with mass tourism (Wearing, Stevenson & Young, 2010, p. 20), wanting precisely to assert claims to city space. As such, tourist identity does a disservice to the sustained engagement and difficult work required to stake claims of familiarity with city space. The stakes are, partly, showing commitment to the city; Tourist identity, for participants, denoted

an ignorance that is declared openly and uses human informants rather than technology to fill in gaps in knowledge. In this way, technological practices of performing belonging fit into participants' commitment to the city, what Massey (2005) might call a commitment to transitioning from space (as static and essentialized) to place (as having personal, affective and social connotations). Spatial practices are also technological practices, where tracking the relationship to technology across participant accounts of everyday urban life generates insight not only into technical functionality that is or isn't useful in navigating space, it also speaks to the social stakes of leveraging technology to perform familiarity rather than alterity. This reflects Chatman's argument that from a sociological perspective, "Information has little to do with data. It means nothing at all if it is not part of a system of related ideas, expectations, standards and values" (Chatman, 1999, p. 209).

There are advantages to tourist identity, which can enable someone to avoid seeming like a threat (as demonstrated by an Occupy Wall Street tactic of dressing like a tourist (Occupy Wall Street, 2012)). Also, the apt use of technology should not be positioned as universally sufficient to pass effectively from one group to another; ethnographic research is riddled with accounts of attempts (and frequently failures) to pass in a social context outside one's own, many of which would be unaltered by a well-timed display of technological proficiency. As a whole, my argument is neither that tourist identity is universally to be avoided nor that technology is universally sufficient to pass as a native, but rather that looking at technology as a tool of social performance and not just a tool of information provides an insightful lens for interrogating boundaries of belonging and privilege.

6 Conclusions

Experiences of transnational migration required participants to make sense of their identities in a new space (or really, set of spaces) and also to produce and reshape identities as part of the process of maintaining relationships abroad. In this brief paper, I have examined HIB in terms of performance, where participants used technology, particularly mobile technology, to hide their status as newcomers. The dual functionality of obtaining information and then using that information to produce or perform a particular identity becomes evident as newcomers leverage a range of technologies – from the MTA webpage to smart phone apps – to produce information about the city as well as themselves, and to undertake identity work that situates themselves as having a relationship of belonging in and familiarity with the city. These practices were one of the clearest indications of the extent to which locating information about city space is only partly about information, and moreover has a powerful link to managing identity.

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8 Table of Tables

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